



Region 2

Wildlife Quarterly

VOLUME 9, ISSUE 35

SPRING 2023

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A Real Hoot

One of spring's great mountain spectacles *by Mike Ebinger*

Spring in the mountains has a lot to offer, and of all the spectacles to soak in, one of my favorites is finding Dusky Grouse and watching their courtship ritual up close. Okay, part of it is I love the grind of getting up high, off trail, and my mountain legs back under me after a long winter.

Another part is I am a mountain grouse hunter come September, so it's fun to watch these birds and their behavior outside of a hunting context. And, well, it's just really cool small-game behavior that you have to work hard to see, and that makes it rewarding!

Dusky Grouse

Dusky Grouse used to be considered a subspecies of Blue Grouse, along with their coastal cousin the Sooty Grouse, but their breeding displays, plumage, vocalizations, and genetics are different. Recent DNA evidence



A female (foreground) and male dusky grouse. Photos by the author unless otherwise noted.

supported splitting Blue Grouse into two species. So in 2006, it was made official, and the Dusky Grouse (*Dendragapus obscurus*) and the Sooty Grouse (*Dendragapus fuliginosus*) were recognized as two species (Zwickle and Bendell, 2020). Their ranges are largely distinct (See distribution map on next page); however, (continued on page 2)

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Left: Counting elk in the Upper Clark Fork. Right: This cedar tree is still alive and well, but long ago suffered an injury that killed a portion of its base. Woodpeckers are clearly happy about this injury, and have been drilling into the dead part of this tree foraging for ants and beetles and their larvae.

A Real Hoot (continued)



Distribution of Dusky and Sooty Grouse in North America. Adapted from Fink et al. 2022.

“The male’s hoot is what you will want to listen for during spring excursions.”

there is slight overlap in the interior zone of British Columbia and even some evidence of the two species interbreeding. Some of us still just call them “Blues,” and here in Montana you probably hear “Blue Grouse” more often than you do “Dusky Grouse.” Nobody likes change, right?

As far as grouse go, Dusksies are big birds, the third largest North American grouse behind the two species of Sage Grouse. They also show geographic variation in

body size and plumage color, with larger and darker variations found in the colder, northern parts of their range. They are long-lived; studies show birds reaching 10-12 years old, with the oldest Blue ever recorded being 14 years of age (Zwickle and Boad, 1989). Hmmm...I could be headed north on a quest for the largest and oldest blue on record!

Breeding Behavior

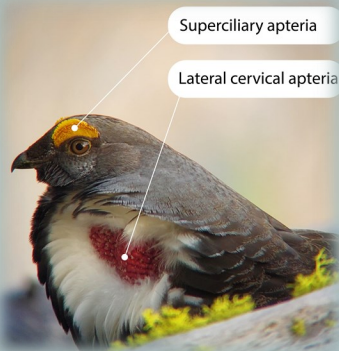
During breeding season, anywhere from late March to early June, males will call and display to females incessantly. Like

most birds, the male Dusky Grouse uses sight and sound to show-off to females. Males fan their tails and use fleshy featherless parts of their body (above their eyes and on their neck) called *apteria*, to catch a female’s attention (see box below) Although the males are brightly colored when on display, they can turn these signals off in an instant if they sense danger, and a silent and still blue grouse on the forest floor is one of nature’s best camouflaged critters.

Vocalizations are diverse, ranging from females distinctive “whinnys” and “cackles” to the signature sound of Dusky Grouse - the male’s “hoot.” The male’s hoot is what you will want to listen for during spring excursions. It is low toned, typically one to five syllables, and for lack of a better description sounds like “whoot...whoot...whoot...whoot.” These low frequency tones are easy to hear (provided you have youth on your side and haven’t fired shotguns for decades without hearing protection), but it is astonishingly difficult to pinpoint the source - the calls seem almost directionless. Nevertheless, after some time, persistence, and practice you will usually find the bird you are looking for.

Once you have located a hooting grouse, there is a good chance you are

Male Breeding Features



Apteria refers to bare patches between feathered parts of birds bodies. Both the superciliary (“eye combs”) and lateral cervical (“neck patch”) apteria change in shape and color with the intensity of breeding behavior. Colors transition from yellow, to orange, to bright red during the peak of displays (compare eye combs left and right).



Photo by: © Nicole Desnoyers



Head bobbing is generally considered part of the later phases of courtship, typically when a female is either in sight or approaching. The action is fast, and only when viewed in slow motion can you see how dramatic the gesture is. If you have ever wondered why the inner parts of a Dusky Grouse's feathers are white, here is your answer— a dramatic rosette of white with black trim outlines the lateral cervical apteria, (aka “neck patch”) which take on a deep vibrant red.

on its breeding grounds. It will defend this area from other males. The “hoot” likely plays a long-distance role in this territorial defense, so there may not be any other males nearby. It's time to slow down and listen. Courtship behavior is complex, and you first need to ascertain if it is happening at this spot or if the male is just advertising his presence. If it is just a male advertising, you will probably just watch him singing and maybe perform the so-called “flutter flights” or “wing flutters”, where the male loudly and rapidly flaps his wings in energetic bursts. However, if there are females in the vicinity and the male is aware of them, you may be lucky enough to observe courtship behavior. Take note of the size, shape, and color of the *apteria*, as these features are indicators of how excited he is. This is particularly true for the eye combs; if they are puffed up and bright red, stay still and keep on the lookout. You might not see the females at first, as they may be up in the trees, but you will hear their distinct “cackles” and eventually they will fly down to see if the male is worthy.

Males will court any female that is present, and this usually begin with tail-fanning and hooting, in combination with displaying their neck patch (see inset on next page). If a female is present and shows interest, either advancing toward the male or vocalizing, he may do a short charge to-

wards the female and emit a single “whoot.” Strutting and tail fanning will continue and as interest escalates you may observe “head bobbing”, which takes place with a full tail fan and display of his brightly colored neck patches (see box above). These head bobs are very fast, and the real effort contained in them can only be appreciated when watched in slow motion (we have posted a few slow-motion videos on our Region 2 Facebook page, just search for Dusky Grouse). If the female finds the male's performance worthy and is ready to mate, the act is fast. A male will jump on the female's back and drop his wings over her side. After a few seconds they will separate, and both may ruffle feathers in each other's presence before going their separate ways. Don't be surprised if the male just starts hooting again looking for another potential mate.

Tips for Locating a Hooter

Get up high and cover ground. You find grouse with your legs and ears! Don't dismiss the snowline either, Dusky Grouse perform a “Reverse Altitudinal Migration” in the fall, heading up high in the mountains to overwinter. In spring, they are working their way back downhill and the transition zone along the snow-line can be a productive place (*cont'd on page 4*)

**Check out the
Montana Fish,
Wildlife & Parks
Facebook page
to watch videos
of Dusky Grouse
courtship!**



Above: A sequence of an apteria (aka, "neck patch") display over roughly 2 seconds (top to bottom).

Literature cited

Fink, D. et al. 2022. eBird Status and Trends, Data Version: 2021; Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, New York.

Zwicker, F.C. and Boag, D.A. 1989. Longevity in Blue Grouse. North American Bird Bander 14(1): 1-4.

Zwicker, F. C. and J. F. Bendell. 2020. Dusky Grouse (*Dendragapus obscurus*), version 1.0 in Birds of the World (P. G. Rodewald, Editor). Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, NY, USA.

A Real Hoot (continued)

to find birds during early spring excursions. Keep an eye out for fresh sign along the snowline; fecal pellets are easy to see against a white background. If you find old droppings in tree wells from winter, you probably went too high. I like to scramble and get off trail and seem to always drift toward edge habitat, high elevation islands of conifers, south facing aspects, and steep ridgelines. I am often surprised how rugged the terrain is where I find Dusks in spring.

Of course, stop and listen periodically. Mornings and evenings are most productive as breeding usually takes place early or later in the day, but I have had good success mid-day on many occasions. When you do find or hear one, take note of the habitat and log it in your memory. Also let your local biologist know when, where, and what you saw!

Monitoring Dusky Grouse Populations

Your observations in spring can help us to monitor Dusky Grouse populations. FWP has been working with Montana State University on improving our Mountain Grouse (Dusky, Ruffed, and Spruce Grouse) monitoring program. Doctoral Candidate Elizabeth Leipold and Dr. Lance McNew worked with FWP to build a Dusky Grouse

habitat model and a monitoring program based on playing grouse calls and listening for responses. FWP biologists and staff in Region 2 are continuing to use this monitoring program each spring to help understand trends in Dusky Grouse populations.

Final Thoughts

I hope you have enjoyed this short rambling on one of nature's lesser-known mountain spectacles. Get out there, be safe, and let us know what you find. As I said in the title, it's a real hoot (pun intended). Any day in the mountains is a good one, so here's one more excuse to get out there!

For the next Quarterly issue, I will continue with the grouse theme, with a bit of fall hunting season in mind: Aging and Sexing Mountain Grouse in the Field. See you in the high country!



Left: Dusky grouse pellets in a depression in the snow where a bird roosted. Above: A female dusky grouse eyeing a male on display. Note the presence of the supercilious apteria (eye combs). Unlike males, their eye combs do not change color and shape during breeding season.

Field Notes

What your regional staff does all day

Mike Ebinger *Blatherings from the Blackfoot*

Whether it's a curious elk taking a sniff and fogging up the lens or a bear just being a bear, wildlife can drastically mess with your trail camera setups by the time you return to pick them up.

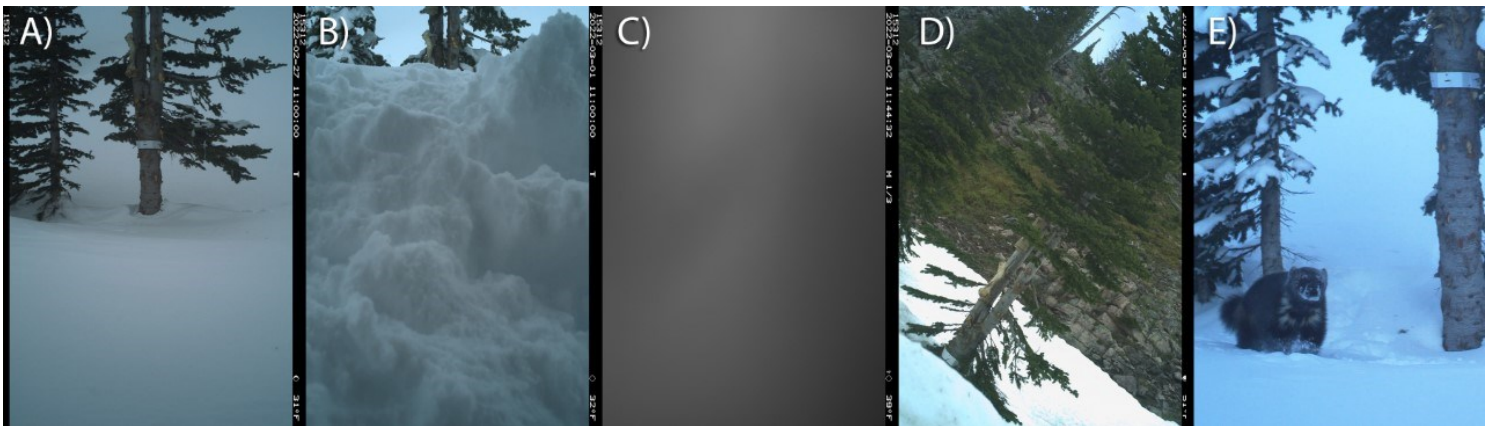
I didn't think much of it when I arrived at the wolverine monitoring station near the Scapegoat Wilderness Boundary and the camera was tilted 45 degrees on the tree trunk. After all, it was a hot July day, and Ezra Schwalm (game warden) and I had just covered 6+ miles from camp including 2000 feet of elevation gain. I was tired and hungry and simply looked at the camera, thought "dang bears", and proceeded to start pulling our equipment from the site.

The camera was tilted in a way that looked like it might not be pointed at the opposing tree trunk where the scent pump was mounted. The scent pump devices drip out a few drops of stinky lure once a day, a stench that we hope will attract wolverines.

The cameras are placed to capture any critter visiting the lure, while gun brushes placed on the lure tree grab hairs from climbing visitors. Ideally the camera is pointed towards the tree trunk so that when a wolverine climbs the tree to investigate, we get a picture.

I kept hoping on the hike out that the bear wrecked our setup on the way out of the den, and not on the way in, so our camera wasn't tilted the wrong direction for the entire winter monitoring period.

When I returned to the office and looked at the pictures, I was surprised to see that it wasn't a bear or any critter. It was an avalanche! Actually, it was two back-to-back slides; the first one piled up snow, but it was the second one that buried the site and bent the camera mount. Those slides happened on the first and second day of March 2022, and the next picture that wasn't just a wall of snow, was captured on June 16.



Trail camera setup on tree with wolverine scent station. A) A picture on February 27th 2022, the last pic before the first avalanche. B) After the first avalanche on March 1, 2022. C). March 2, 2022: a second avalanche buried the camera and must have been forceful enough to bend the mounts 45 degrees. D) The first picture after the avalanche that didn't look like panel C; from June 19th 2022. E) But don't worry, we snapped some pictures of a visitor earlier in the year before the site was buried.

Kirstie Yeager *A Winter Elk Survey*

I meet the pilot at the hanger just before dawn. The sun won't fully rise for a while yet, but the darkness is beginning to fade. Our plan is to depart as soon as we have just enough light to safely take off. Bulls are hard to find, but a little less difficult at first light when they are more likely to be grazing out in the open.

Within a few minutes we are strapped in the aircraft by a four-point harness. I turn on my GPS, get my clipboard ready, and fill out the header on the datasheet. The pilot starts flipping buttons, and the rotors come to life. I begin to feel weightless. A bolt of excitement shoots through me as the aircraft gains altitude, tilts slightly to the left, and begins to pick up speed. It's expected to be a smooth ride, but I chew a few ginger candies, just in case. (continued on page 6)

Winter Elk Survey *(continued)*

A large herd of elk on Spotted Dog Wildlife Management Area. Kirstie Yeager photo.



As we head west, we fly first over suburban communities. The neighborhoods below are still dark and quiet. I imagine people in their homes eating breakfast and getting their kids ready for school. Traffic is picking up with the early risers who are already on their way to the office. I think to myself, *This is my office*, and smile.

Before long, we leave civilization behind and the heavily timbered Boulder Mountains extend beneath us. The snow appears deep after several months of winter. We skip over the Continental Divide. It's so easy in a helicopter. Last fall, I hiked a few trails along the Divide with my dog. I imagine it may be summer before enough snow melts off to get back up here in my truck for more exploring on foot.

As we drop down the west side, we are in the survey area. This morning, we are conducting an elk survey in the northern end of Hunting District 215, which is comprised largely of the Spotted Dog Wildlife Management Area (WMA). We systematically search the district by completing multiple transects spaced to maximize our likelihood of finding elk. All elk observed are counted and classified as cows, calves, yearling bulls, or brow-tined bulls. These annual winter flights are the primary method we use to monitor the herds. Total counts, age ratios (calf:cow), and sex ratios (bull:cow) are used to assess overall population trends. Subadult and adult bulls don't typically associate with the larger groups of cows, calves, and yearling bulls. Rather, they tend to be in smaller bachelor groups throughout the timber. Thus, our strategy was to begin our survey as early as possible, so we have a greater chance of finding and counting these elusive bulls.

We spot our first bachelor group of seven adult bulls grazing on an open south-facing hillside. The animals turn curiously towards us and move up the hill. I note the observation. The sun is now peaking over the horizon illuminating the scene with a soft morning glow. The snow has a slightly pink hue. Nature is painting a beautiful picture, and I am grateful for the opportunity to bear witness.

We find another bachelor group grazing in an open patch along the edge of the timber. We continue to fly transects and search for the next few hours. We find relatively fresh tracks made by elk crossing open hillsides and meandering through the timber. Unfortunately, many animals remain hidden.

We see the main herd spread across a large open hillside in the heart of the WMA. We approach slowly and devise a plan. We estimate around 1,000 elk. Such a large group can be challenging to count and classify on site. We also have the option of taking photos with my fancy Nikon DSLR and analyzing the images back at the office. We decide to try both. We circle from a distance and capture a few wide-angle photos of the group for total count. However, many animals are bedded, so classification won't be possible. We creep closer with each pass. The elk begin to respond to the large, noisy bird in the sky. They stand and start to congregate. I take more photos. We are still too far for an accurate classification. We keep our distance and patiently wait for the elk to form groups. We take notice of fences and other obstacles and find a clear path for the elk to travel. We begin to slowly move the herd. I take a series of photos. Over the next 20 minutes or so, we count and classify the herd by separating off small groups of 75-100 at a time. We work quickly to minimize stress to the elk. We finish the final group and survey the scene from a distance. Some groups have rejoined while others are resting along the hillside. Satisfied that everyone looks okay, we move off.

Our survey is complete. We are confident that we have found all of the elk that we were meant to find today. We will never find everyone, and we consider that when interpreting our counts. They are minimum counts and estimates that, when done consistently and annually, are a good indicator of overall population trends. As we head back to the airport, I add last minute notes to the datasheet. I pause to look out the window. The soft morning glow is gone. Shadows cast by a high sun now add dimension to the world below.

Kirstie Yeager is your new Upper Clark Fork area biologist, joining the team in summer 2022 from Colorado.

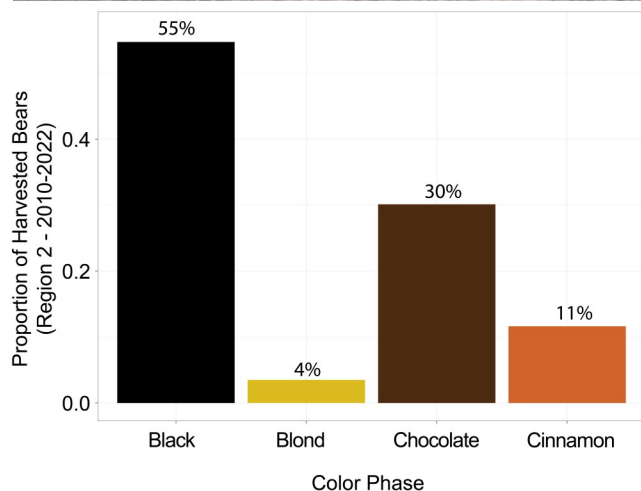
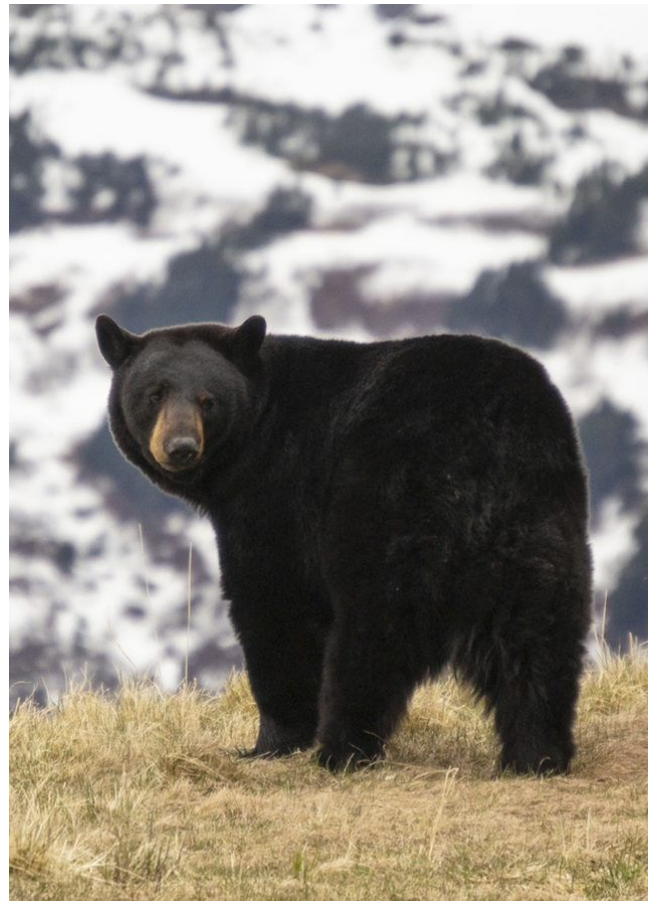


Bull elk in the Blackfoot during a winter elk survey. Photo by Mike Ebinger.

Species Highlight: Black Bear

Recently, Region 2 decided to distribute Species Lead responsibilities among the four area wildlife biologists. While each biologist manages all big game species within their geographic areas of responsibility, Species Leads will compile regional harvest and survey data for reports, serve on statewide working groups and coordinate with other state species-specific efforts, and stay up to date on current research and management on a broader scale. We hope to include summaries of such activities in the Quarterly. (FWP photos)

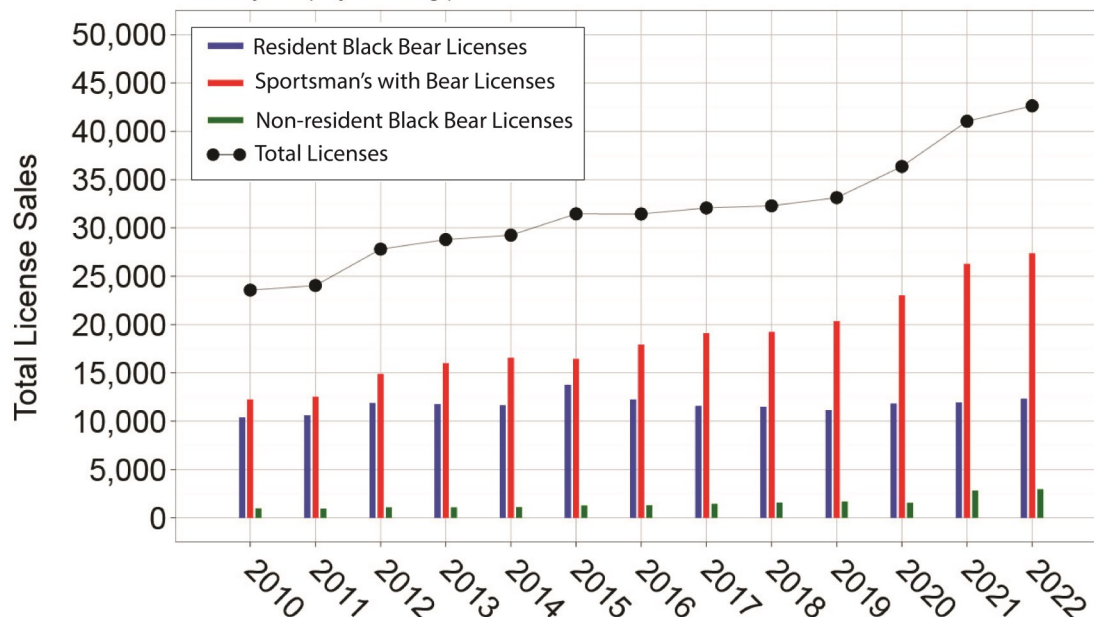
Spring is just around the corner and for many parts of Western Montana this means a refreshing change from months of seeing mostly white and ever-green. Everyone has their own favorite spring color palette – Glacier Lily and Buttercup yellows, Shooting Star and Bitterroot pinks, or hillsides of Balsam-root gold. As much as I enjoy these blooming additions of color in the mountains, my favorite colors announcing the return of spring are black, chocolate, cinnamon, and blond; the four different colors of Montana's black bears. If black bears harvested as part of Montana's hunting seasons are representative, then just over one-half of Region 2's black bears are black, about one-third chocolate, one-eighth cinnamon, and the blond color phase is the rarest of all.



Spring brings the return of bears to the landscape, and while this means the return of managing bear-human conflicts, for wildlife enthusiasts and springtime hunters it is a splendid time of year. For many, this early season enjoyment might be spotting the first bear, or the first female with cubs. For others, like myself, it is the first bear I see that isn't jet-black that generates excitement. I guess I think that anyone can see a black color phase, but if I see a cinnamon bear then I must either be lucky or working hard at spending time in the mountains and behind a spotting scope. On those rare occasions when I do see a blond bear, I know it is something special and worth appreciating. Another thing to enjoy about spring bears is they are entertaining to watch. Don't get me

Black Bear License Sales (State-wide:2010–2022)

Preliminary Data (subject to change)



Total black bear license sales by type in Montana for 2010–2022. Black lines and points represent the total black bear license sales, and the colored bars show individual license type sales for each year.

wrong, all wildlife is fun to watch, but for some reason when I get a bear in my spotting scope I can't seem to pull my eyes away—I'm afraid I will miss something amazing that is about to happen!

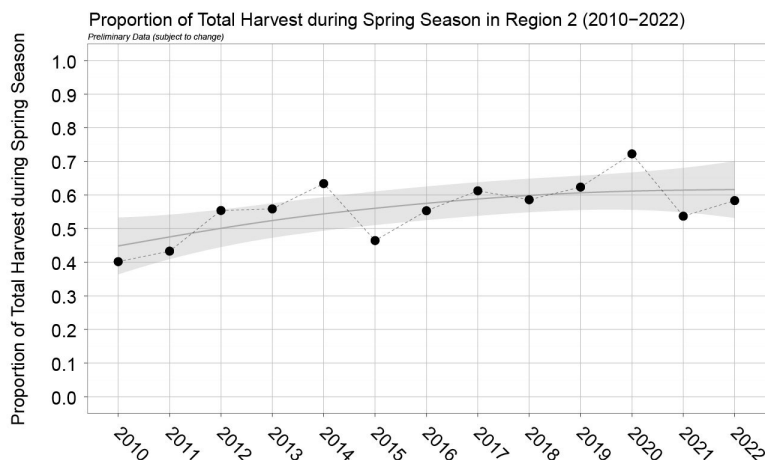
Spring bear hunting has seen an increase in participation in recent years. It seems what used to be a tag to have in your pocket "just in case" has shifted more towards something intrinsically worth pursuing. Perhaps it is the time away from hunting since the fall, the longing to get back in shape after a long sedentary winter, or just the need to be on a hunt in the mountains focused and undistracted. Regardless of the reasons, bear hunting seems more popular

than ever. License sales for black bear tags have increased over the last three years, and as of 2022, were up approximately 33% (relative to 2015–2019) to record levels.

Trends in harvest patterns show that hunters are increasingly focusing on spring as the time to hunt bears. From 2010–2022, Region 2 spring harvest has increased from roughly 45% of the total annual harvest to over 60%. Perhaps more people are realizing the fun and challenge of a springtime mountain hunt. Putting your spot-and-stalk skills up against the variable spring weather conditions, navigating the receding mountain snowline, and finding where bears will be during spring is a worthy test.

To my fellow spring bear enthusiasts, another spring is almost here! I hope you find some time to spot a few and maybe you'll be lucky enough to see the elusive blond bear. Make the best of your spring bear adventures, be they watching, photography, or hunting.

Mike Ebinger, Black Bear Species Lead



The proportion of Region 2 black bear harvest occurring during the Spring season 2010–2022. Black points and lines show the annual data, and the shaded gray region and solid line are the fitted nonlinear regression results and 95% CI.



Field Notes

What your regional staff does all day

Torrey Ritter *Living Dead Wood*

There's not much field work for a nongame wildlife biologist in the winter. However, it is a critical time for catching up on data entry, report writing, research, and planning for the coming season.

One of the few field efforts I do get during the winter is evaluating and commenting on timber harvest plans. These plans come to us from the U.S. Forest Service, the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, or even from within FWP for timber harvest on state-owned Wildlife Management Areas, Fishing Access Sites, and State Parks. It is our job to assess the landscape context of the timber harvest, figure out which species might be using those forested areas, and provide suggestions for the timber harvest that will have the best outcomes for nongame wildlife like owls, woodpeckers, songbirds, bats, and even toads (yes, timber harvest can affect toads).

One of the most important parts of the forest for a huge variety of nongame wildlife is what we call the "dead wood component". This includes standing dead trees (i.e. snags), living trees with dead parts, and fallen trees on the forest floor. Calling these parts of the forest "dead wood" is a misnomer, because "dead wood" is teeming with life including ants, beetles, spiders, millipedes, and even small mammals like voles and shrews. All these creatures are an essential part of



A newly dead tree that has been ripped apart by woodpeckers. The woodpeckers are going after wood-boring beetles that live just under the tree's bark.

Even large critters like bears take advantage of dead wood in the forest. This downed tree was shredded apart by a bear looking for ant and beetle larvae in the decomposing wood.



the forest food web. Furthermore, dozens of critters, from pileated woodpeckers to pine martens, use holes in dead wood (often called "cavities") for nesting and resting.

When evaluating timber harvest plans, we pay close attention to components of the plan related to the retention of dead wood in terms of size, density, and location within the affected area. By taking care of the dead wood component, timber harvest can have minimal negative effects on nongame wildlife using the area. In fact, thoughtful timber harvest can be highly beneficial to wildlife in areas where forests have become too dense or have shifted to tree species that were either not there historically or at much lower densities than they are today.

Torrey Ritter is the Region 2 nongame biologist. Enjoy his "Tuesdays with Torrey" series on Facebook!

Rebecca Mowry *Godspeed, Little Ram*

On March 9, I received a very unwelcome text message: one of my Painted Rocks bighorn sheep GPS collars had switched onto “mortality” mode.

This wasn’t just any sheep: this was my last collared ram. And he was rather remarkable.

We’d caught him in February 2021 during a helicopter net-gunning operation, in which we collared a handful of other sheep (rams and ewes) to monitor movements across the landscape as well as causes of mortality. During that capture, we noticed that this ram—estimated to be 4 years old at the time—had a badly broken rear leg. It wasn’t caused by the capture; his broken tibia was scarred over and bulbous, his hoof bent backward and overgrown; he’d essentially been walking on his knuckle, for a year at least.

I remember the team debating whether we should euthanize him then and there. But since the injury was old, we decided to give him the benefit of the doubt, collar him, and hope for the best.

He ended up being my most interesting sheep.

Even with a badly broken leg, each spring that ram traveled over 15 miles from Painted Rocks Reservoir northeast to Trapper Peak, the highest mountain in the Bitterroot Range (10,157 ft). We had no idea

these sheep would move that far, or go that high. He spent all summer up there, ranging across the high country toward (and sometimes across) the Idaho border and then back to Trapper. Then, like clockwork, he’d return to Painted Rocks for the rut.

He did this twice before his untimely demise. After I received the mortality alert, my dog and I

hiked up a steep hill north of the reservoir and there, right at the base of the cliffs, was my ram. The scene suggested he’d been killed by a mountain lion, whose tracks we followed to the kill site. Perhaps his broken leg predisposed him to predation. But I was surprised he lived as long as he did.

I like to think that wildlife appreciate the grandeur of their habitat. Sheep country is truly glorious. After I removed the ram’s collar and prepared for the trek back down, I had to stop, sit down in the snow, and take a moment. As I looked out over the wild, rugged West Fork from these lofty

cliffs, I couldn’t help but admire Broken Leg Ram and all he had accomplished in his short life. He beat the odds (at least for a time). And his life added greatly to our understanding of his herd, and of the incredible tenacity of life in the hardest of places.

Rebecca Mowry is the Bitterroot area wildlife biologist.





Check it out...

Recently, a hunter approached biologist Ryan Klimstra with a rather amazing jawbone from a buck white-tailed deer he had harvested in Region 2. The mandible showed evidence of a severe abscess that affected bone growth and development. Dr. Jennifer Ramsey, FWP state wildlife veterinarian, said it probably happened when the deer was young. "The deer looked to be in great condition and had a nice set of antlers" by the time he was harvested, according to Klimstra.

Field Notes

What your regional staff does all day

Ryan Klimstra *A Trophy Deer Hunt*

I was born and raised in the foothills of the oldest mountain chain in the world, the Appalachians. Growing up in western North Carolina proved to be full of adventure and undoubtedly sparked my career path. Much like other professional wildlife biologists, I spent the majority of my childhood out of doors, no matter the season. I was lucky to grow up in the woods and very fortunate to have parents that encouraged my interest in the natural world and spending time outside. Perhaps their encouragement was rooted in the selfishness of reducing the number of children inside by one. Regardless of motive, I am thankful my parents allowed me to explore and learn about nature by simply being in it and a part of it.

My brother also played an intense role in fostering my interests in the great outdoors and the critters we found out there. From trapping raccoons and opossums out of our apple orchard to the very first deer we (he pulled the trigger, but the memory is so intense it's hard to remember it wasn't me) harvested together. We did not grow up in a family that hunted but they were supportive of us doing so.

My brother and I both took hunter education and read every issue of Outdoor Life magazine in preparation for our careers as big game trophy hunters. My brother was 17 and I was 12 when we finally accomplished this seemingly impossible feat: the first deer harvest. The night before this hunt I don't think I slept for more than an hour in anticipation of our big debut as big game hunters. Somehow, I must have drifted off and my brother was rousing me from bed at an unbelievably early hour, and to this day, the only things that get me out of bed when everyone else is sleeping are hunting, fishing, and spending time outside.

We got to our family friend's apple orchard before dawn and climbed to the top of the old windmill

tower that was converted into a platform. I quickly dozed off due to the lack of sleep, but I trusted my brother to wake me when all the giant bucks showed up. True to his word he did wake me around 10am with the blast from his 12-gauge pointed at what I could only assume had to be a Boone and Crocket record. I quickly looked in the direction of his gun barrel and saw the monster. . . all 2 points on each side and likely weighing in around 100-110 pounds. The adrenaline was pumping, and we were both shaking as we watched the buck disappear into the orchard. WHAT DO WE DO NOW?

Luckily my brother was a little more collected than I, and he made the executive decision to wait for a while. We probably waited 20 minutes before climbing down from the stand, but it seemed like we waited as long as the last day of school always seemed to take. We searched the orchard where we thought the deer should be but only found a few small drops of blood. We began systematically walking orchard rows. I could tell from my brother's face that he was extremely unsettled by the prospect of wounding and losing his first deer. About the time we were ready to throw our hands up and call someone for help (who would we call? No clue but we were going to start dialing), there it was in the tall grass not far from where we started the search. Somehow, we had missed it, and the deer had only traveled about 20 yards from where he shot it.

WHAT DO WE DO NOW? Well, remember our preparations via hunter education and our Outdoor Life magazine subscription. We were prepared. It was about 2pm at this point and my brother and I had a snack and some water and pulled out the issue of Outdoor Life that had a detailed article on how to dress a deer. We got to work with our step-by-step guide, and about 4 hours later (yes, it really took over 4 hours), in the dark, we were cold and finishing up by the light of a small flashlight. We loaded the dressed deer on top of our 1987 Subaru station wagon and raced to the meat packers where our Dad was waiting to take pictures and commemorate our first successful hunt.

This experience, much like most people's first hunt, is forever seared in my memory. That day I learned what a 'real' trophy was! As it turns out, a real trophy is not antlers on a monster 230-lb buck. Rather, it is the feeling that came with knowing we were not going to give up on finding this deer. It is the feeling of pride knowing that we took the time to clean the deer properly. It is the feeling of pride when eating those venison meals with our family. It is the connection I made with my brother that day. It is the keen awareness that it was our duty and direct responsibility to properly use this animal that we had taken life from. As a result, I chose a career path that allows me to be a champion and advocate of the resources (all wildlife, both game and non-game species) in an effort to ensure they remain accessible and present for future generations.

Ryan Klimstra is the new Lower Clark Fork/Missoula area biologist, who joined us last summer from Alaska. He is pictured here capturing an Alaskan wolverine.





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Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, through its employees and citizen commission and board, provides for the stewardship of the fish, wildlife, parks, and recreational resources of Montana, while contributing to the quality of life for present and future generations.

THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.



The Region 2 bear/lion conflict management team poses in front of their new carcass pick-up trailer, generously donated by the Montana Outdoor Legacy Foundation. This trailer will enable the team to expand its efforts to pick up and safely dispose of dead livestock, preventing conflicts that can occur when those carcasses attract predators. Ranchers who need a carcass picked up can contact Region 2 and be put in touch with a team member. Left to right: Brad Balis, Bruce Montgomery, Jamie Jonkel, Eli Hampson.